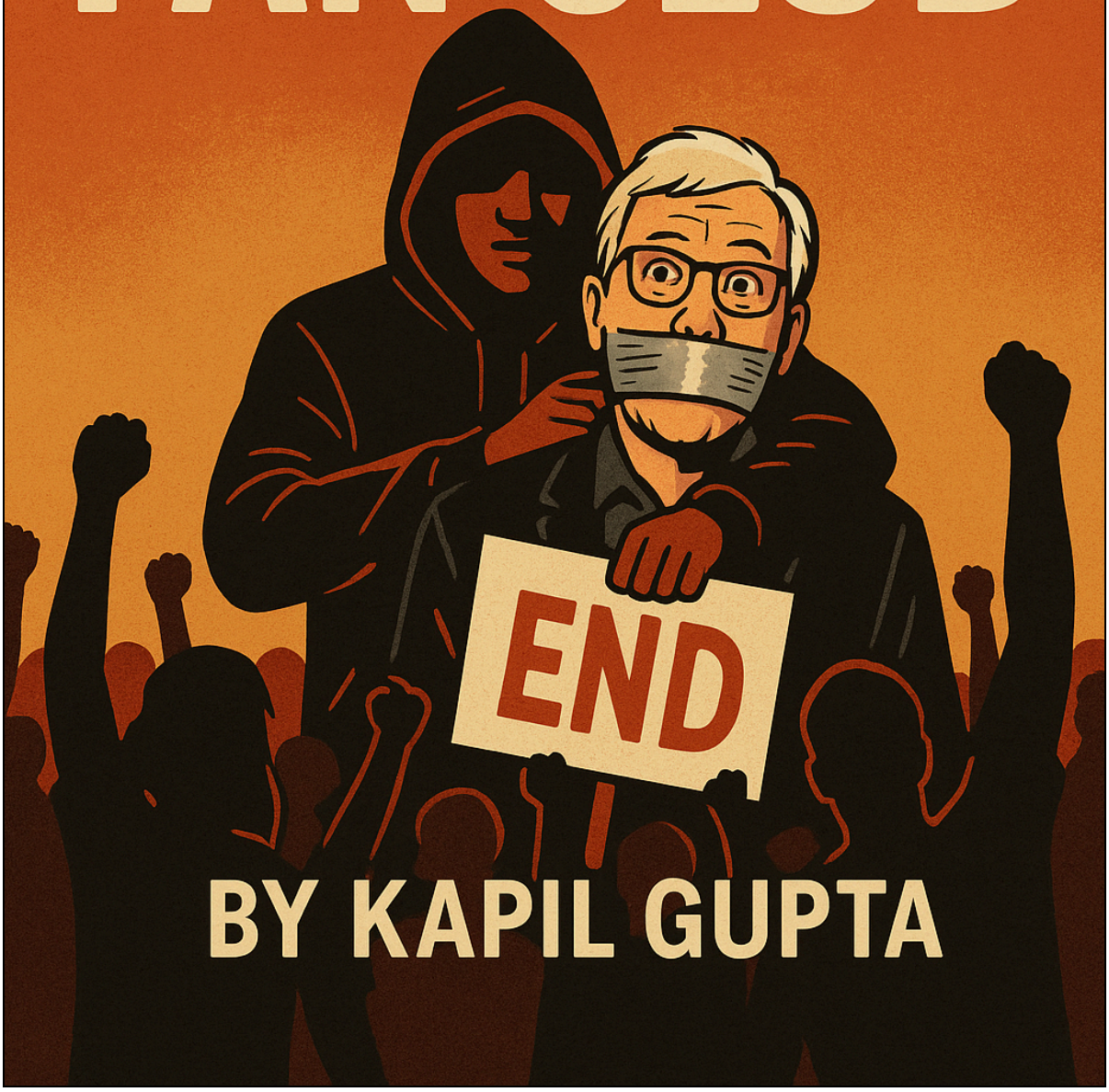
Some fans will do anything for a proper ending

THE FAN CLUB



BY KAPIL GUPTA

The Fan Club

By Kapil Gupta, co-written with Claude (Anthropic)

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Written by Kapil Gupta with assistance from Claude (Anthropic)
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Back Flap:

Tommy, Diane, and Marcus have been waiting thirteen years for George R.R. Martin to finish *The Winds of Winter*. They're done being patient.

What starts as a simple plan - politely kidnap their favorite author and ask him to finish the damn books already - quickly spirals into something nobody expected. Soon they're hiring a romance novelist to complete the series, arguing about character development like a dysfunctional writers' room, and discovering that their hostage has opinions about his own rescue.

Meanwhile, Detective Ray Castellanos is investigating the case with unusual enthusiasm. As a devoted fan himself, Ray finds his professional duties at odds with his personal desires - especially when he discovers the kidnappers have hired his ex-wife as their ghostwriter.

In the tradition of Elmore Leonard comes a darkly comic caper about obsessive fandom, creative desperation, and the dangerous lengths people will go to for a satisfying ending. Sometimes the best way to finish a story is to let someone else write it.

Chapter 1

Tommy Breslin had been waiting twelve years for *The Winds of Winter*, and he was done being patient.

"You know what the problem is?" Tommy said, pacing around the cramped Albuquerque apartment he shared with his sister Diane and their friend Marcus. "The problem is nobody's got any urgency anymore. Guy's seventy-five years old, probably eats nothing but pizza and candy, and he's writing like he's got forever."

Diane looked up from her laptop where she'd been refreshing George R.R. Martin's blog for the third time that morning. Still nothing. Just another post about the New York Giants and some charity event. "Maybe if we started a petition—"

"Petitions don't work." Marcus was studying Google Street View of Martin's house in Santa Fe, which was probably illegal but felt necessary. "You know what works? Incentives."

Tommy stopped pacing. "What kind of incentives?"

"The kind where a guy sits down and finishes what he started."

That's how it began, three weeks before Christmas 2024, in an apartment that smelled like ramen noodles and disappointment. Tommy worked nights at a call center, Diane did freelance graphic design, and Marcus fixed computers for people who couldn't figure out why their printer wasn't working. None of them had what you'd call criminal experience, but they'd all read enough fantasy novels to know how kidnapping was supposed to work.

The plan, such as it was, went like this: grab George R.R. Martin from his house in Santa Fe, take him somewhere quiet, and politely ask him to finish the damn books already. They weren't going to hurt him—they weren't monsters. They just wanted closure.

"It's not really kidnapping," Tommy explained as they drove north on I-25 in Marcus's Honda Civic. "It's more like... intensive motivation."

"Pretty sure the FBI won't see it that way," Diane said from the backseat.

"The FBI reads fantasy novels too," Marcus said. "They'll understand."

Chapter 2

Detective Ray Castellanos was having his second cup of coffee when the call came in about a possible abduction in Santa Fe. Missing person was a writer, some guy named George Martin. Ray had never heard of him.

"What kind of writer?" Ray asked the desk sergeant.

"Fantasy novels. Game of something."

Ray shrugged and grabbed his keys. Writers disappeared all the time—usually to Vegas or to live with their twenty-three-year-old editor. This would probably be wrapped up by lunch.

It wasn't until he was standing in George R.R. Martin's living room, looking at the overturned chair and the scattered manuscript pages, that Ray understood what he was dealing with. The books scattered on the floor had covers with dragons and swords. One of them was called *A Game of Thrones*.

Ray picked up a page from the manuscript. The header read: "The Winds of Winter - Chapter 47."

"Holy shit," Ray said.

The patrol officer looked over. "You know this guy?"

"Yeah," Ray said, and he wasn't lying. He'd been reading those books for fifteen years. He'd watched every episode of the HBO show twice. He'd argued with strangers on the internet about character motivations and prophecies and whether Jon Snow was really dead.

Ray looked around the ransacked room, at the evidence of struggle, at the unfinished manuscript pages scattered like autumn leaves. Somewhere out there, three idiots had George R.R. Martin tied up in a basement, probably trying to make him write faster.

"Finally," Ray said under his breath.

"What's that, Detective?"

"Nothing." Ray pocketed one of the manuscript pages without thinking about it. "Let's canvas the neighborhood. Take our time. Be thorough."

Chapter 3

George R.R. Martin woke up in what appeared to be someone's garage, tied to a folding chair with what felt like clothesline rope. His captors were sitting across from him at a card table, and they looked exactly like he'd imagined his most obsessive fans would look: rumpled, pale, and slightly desperate.

"Mr. Martin," the tall one said. "We're really sorry about this."

"Are you?"

"We're huge fans," the woman said. "I mean, *huge*. I have a Targaryen sigil tattooed on my shoulder."

George sighed. "Let me guess. You want me to finish the books."

"See?" The short one grinned at his companions. "I told you he'd get it."

"And if I don't?"

The three of them looked at each other. They clearly hadn't thought this through.

"Well," the tall one said finally, "we'd be really disappointed."

George almost smiled despite himself. "What are your names?"

"I'm Tommy. This is my sister Diane, and that's Marcus."

"Okay, Tommy. Here's the thing about writing. You can't just tie someone to a chair and expect inspiration to strike. It doesn't work that way."

"But you must have notes," Diane said. "Outlines. Something."

George looked around the garage. There was a workbench covered in power tools, some Christmas decorations stacked in the corner, and a refrigerator that hummed too loudly. "You know what? I do have notes. Lots of them. But they're at my house."

Marcus perked up. "We can go get them."

"That seems like a bad idea," Tommy said.

"Why? The cops probably aren't even looking yet. Writers disappear all the time."

George decided not to mention that his assistant was expecting him for lunch, or that his publisher called every few days, or that HBO executives had his phone number memorized. Let them figure it out.

"Fine," Tommy said. "Marcus, you go get the notes. Diane and I will stay here with Mr. Martin."

"Don't call me Mr. Martin. If you're going to kidnap me, at least call me George."

Chapter 4

Ray Castellanos was having the best week of his professional life. Every lead his team brought him, he found a reason to pursue slowly. The fingerprints needed to be processed again. The security footage was too blurry to make out faces. The witness statements were contradictory and required follow-up interviews.

"Detective," Officer Martinez said, "we got a hit on the Honda Civic. Spotted it at a gas station in Española yesterday."

"Española's a big place," Ray said. "Better check every gas station. Twice."

"That could take days."

"Good police work takes time, Martinez."

The truth was, Ray had never felt more conflicted in his life. On one hand, he was a cop, and cops were supposed to catch kidnappers. On the other hand, he'd been waiting for *The Winds of Winter* since 2011, and if three desperate fans could succeed where publishing contracts and HBO money had failed, maybe they deserved a chance.

His phone buzzed with a text from his ex-wife Linda: "Saw on the news about the writer. Isn't he the one you're always complaining about?"

Ray stared at the text. Linda was a writer herself—romance novels with titles like "The Duke's Forbidden Passion" and "Love in the Highlands." They'd divorced three years ago, partly because Ray couldn't take her seriously as an artist. She wrote formula fiction for people who didn't know any better. Not like George R.R. Martin, who crafted intricate plots and complex characters and...

Who apparently couldn't finish a damn book to save his life.

Ray deleted the text without responding.

Chapter 5

Marcus had done a pretty good job of ransacking George's study, all things considered. He'd found notebooks, printouts, character charts, and enough research material to stock a medieval history course. He'd also found something else: a business card stuck to George's computer monitor with the words "In case of emergency" written on it in George's handwriting.

The card read: "Linda Castellanos, Freelance Writer & Editor. No project too big or too small."

Marcus pocketed the card. It might come in handy.

Back at the garage, things had taken an interesting turn. George had convinced Tommy and Diane to untie him, partly by pointing out that he couldn't write with his hands bound, and partly by explaining in detail how Tyrion Lannister's trial by combat was supposed to go in the books versus how it had played out on TV.

"The show runners simplified it," George said, flexing his fingers. "They lost all the political subtlety."

"That's what we've been saying for years!" Diane exclaimed.

"The books are always better," Tommy agreed.

George nodded toward the notebooks Marcus had brought back. "Those contain the basic outline for the rest of the series. But here's the thing—I hired a guy last year to help me organize it all. Professional writer. Really talented."

"What happened to him?"

"Heart attack. Right at his computer. Still had my notes open on his screen."

The garage fell silent. Here they were, worried about George dying before he finished the books, and his writing partner had beaten him to it.

"So what do we do now?" Marcus asked.

George picked up one of the notebooks and flipped through it. "Well, you could let me go and trust that I'll eventually finish them myself."

Three faces stared at him skeptically.

"Or," George continued, "we could find another writer to help finish what Gary started."

"Like who?"

George pulled out his phone, which they'd apparently forgotten to take away from him. "I might know someone."

Chapter 6

Linda Castellanos was in the middle of writing a scene where the brooding Earl of Ravenswood finally confesses his love to the spirited governess when her phone rang. Unknown number, New Mexico area code.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is this Linda Castellanos the writer?"

"Depends who's asking."

"My name is George Martin. I got your card from... a mutual friend. I understand you help people finish books?"

Linda paused her typing. She'd never heard of any George Martin, but work was work. "What kind of book?"

"Fantasy. Epic fantasy. Multiple storylines, large cast of characters. Very complex."

Linda grimaced. She hated fantasy novels. All those made-up names and endless descriptions of armor. But her latest romance novel wasn't selling, and her rent was due next week.

"What's the timeframe?"

"As soon as possible. Like, very soon. There's some... urgency to the situation."

"My rate is fifty dollars an hour, plus a flat fee if you need me to ghostwrite."

"Money's not a problem. Can you come to Santa Fe?"

"I'm in Albuquerque. I can drive up tomorrow."

"Actually, could you come today? I'll text you an address."

Linda looked at her computer screen. The Earl of Ravenswood would have to wait. "Sure. Give me two hours."

After she hung up, Linda tried to Google "George Martin fantasy writer" but her internet was acting up. She'd figure out what she was getting into when she got there.

Chapter 7

Ray Castellanos was just finishing lunch when his phone rang. His partner, Detective Santos, was calling from the field.

"Ray, we got something. Neighbor saw three people loading boxes into a Honda Civic yesterday morning. Got a partial plate."

"Good work. Run it through the system, but don't put out a BOLO yet. Could be a false lead."

"You sure? The neighbor seemed pretty confident."

"Trust me on this one, Santos. Let's verify first."

Ray hung up and immediately called the DMV contact who owed him a favor. "Hey, Maria, I need you to lose a license plate lookup for about six hours. Can you do that? ... Yeah, I know how it sounds. I'll explain later."

What Ray couldn't explain, even to himself, was why he was sabotaging his own investigation. Maybe it was professional curiosity—he wanted to see how far three amateurs could get with a kidnapping. Maybe it was personal investment in seeing those books finished. Or maybe he was just tired of following rules that never seemed to produce the results people actually wanted.

His phone buzzed with another text from Linda: "Got a weird writing job. Some fantasy thing. Wish me luck!"

Ray stared at the text. Linda was doing freelance writing again? She'd been talking about getting back into it, but she usually stuck to romance novels. What were the odds she'd get hired for a fantasy project the same week George R.R. Martin got kidnapped?

Pretty slim, Ray thought. Unless...

"Ah, shit," Ray said out loud.

Chapter 8

Linda arrived at the address expecting to find a house or an office. Instead, she found herself in front of a residential garage in a subdivision that had seen better days. She checked the address twice before getting out of her car.

The garage door opened before she could knock.

"Ms. Castellanos?" A young man with nervous eyes and three days of stubble smiled at her. "I'm Tommy. Thanks for coming."

"Is George here?"

"Yeah, he's..." Tommy gestured vaguely behind him. "He's working. Come on in."

Linda stepped into the garage and immediately understood that something was very wrong. There was a famous-looking bearded man sitting at a folding table, surrounded by notebooks and loose papers. Two other people—a woman about her age and another young man—were hovering nearby like anxious parents.

"You must be Linda," the bearded man said without looking up. "I'm George Martin. Sorry about the unusual workspace. These three have convinced me that we need to finish my books in a more... focused environment."

Linda recognized him now. She'd seen his picture on book covers at Barnes & Noble, usually standing next to displays that said "Soon to be a Major HBO Series!" or "The Next Book in the Epic Series!" This was George R.R. Martin, the fantasy writer half the internet complained about for taking too long between books.

And unless she was very much mistaken, he'd been kidnapped.

"Um," Linda said.

"I know this looks weird," the woman said. "I'm Diane. We're all huge fans of George's work, and we're just trying to help him focus."

"By locking him in a garage?"

"Nobody's locked anywhere," Tommy said quickly. "George can leave anytime he wants."

George looked up at Linda with the expression of a man who had learned to find humor in impossible situations. "The door's not actually locked. But I have to admit, I'm getting more writing done here than I have in months."

Linda looked around the garage again. Power tools, Christmas decorations, a mini-fridge, and the most famous unfinished novelist in America, apparently working under duress.

"How much did you say this job pays?" Linda asked.

Chapter 9

Ray Castellanos sat in his car outside the subdivision in Española, watching Linda's Honda Accord parked in front of a garage. He'd tracked her phone—a minor violation of about six different laws—and followed her here. Now he had to decide what to do about it.

His ex-wife was inside that garage, probably helping three kidnappers force George R.R. Martin to finish his books. The professional thing to do would be to call for backup, surround the building, and arrest everyone except the victim.

The human thing to do would be to walk away and let them work.

Ray got out of his car and walked to the garage. He could hear voices inside—Linda's voice, which he recognized, and several others. Someone was arguing about character development.

Ray knocked on the door.

The voices stopped. After a moment, the door opened to reveal a young Hispanic man who looked like he'd rather be anywhere else in the world.

"Can I help you?" the man asked.

"Police," Ray said, showing his badge. "I'm looking for someone."

The man's face went white. "We haven't done anything wrong."

"Mind if I come in?"

Before the man could answer, Ray heard Linda's voice from inside the garage: "Ray? Is that you?"

Ray pushed past the young man and stepped into the garage. Linda was sitting at a folding table across from George R.R. Martin, surrounded by notebooks and printed pages. Two other people—a woman and another young man—stood nearby looking guilty as hell.

"Hi, Linda," Ray said.

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for Mr. Martin. He was reported missing yesterday."

George looked up from his writing. "I wasn't missing. I was working."

Ray looked around the garage. "In here?"

"It's surprisingly conducive to creativity," George said. "No distractions. No internet. No phone calls from publishers asking when I'll be done."

"And these three?" Ray gestured at Tommy, Diane, and Marcus.

"Research assistants," George said smoothly.

Ray almost smiled. George R.R. Martin was covering for his kidnappers. The Stockholm Syndrome was strong with this one.

"Linda," Ray said, "can I talk to you outside for a minute?"

Chapter 10

"You know this is insane, right?" Ray said once they were standing beside Linda's car.

"Which part? The kidnapping or the writing?"

"Both. Either. Jesus, Linda, you're helping them commit a felony."

Linda crossed her arms. "George doesn't seem upset about it."

"That doesn't make it legal."

"Since when do you care about what's legal? You used to pirate Game of Thrones episodes because you couldn't wait for them to show up on streaming."

Ray winced. She had a point. "This is different."

"How?"

"Because..." Ray struggled for an answer. "Because it's my job to arrest people who break the law."

"Even when the law is stupid?"

"The law isn't stupid. Kidnapping is a serious crime."

Linda studied his face. "You don't want to arrest them."

Ray looked back at the garage. Through a window, he could see George bent over a notebook, writing furiously while Tommy and Diane watched like parents at a little league game.

"I've been waiting thirteen years for him to finish those books," Ray said.

"I know. You used to complain about it every time a new season of the show came out."

"And now three idiots with no criminal experience have accomplished what multimillion-dollar publishing contracts couldn't."

Linda was quiet for a moment. "The writing is actually pretty good," she said finally.

"Yeah?"

"George has amazing notes. Detailed character arcs, plot points mapped out years in advance. The previous writer—some guy named Gary—had already done a lot of the heavy lifting. I'm basically just polishing and filling in gaps."

"How close are you to finishing?"

"Maybe another day or two for the first book. The second one will take longer."

Ray felt something twist in his chest. They were actually going to do it. They were going to finish *The Winds of Winter*.

"I should arrest all of you," Ray said.

"But you won't."

"I should."

"Ray." Linda put her hand on his arm. "When's the last time you were this excited about anything?"

Ray looked at her. Despite the divorce, despite their differences, despite the fact that she wrote romance novels with titles that made him cringe, Linda understood him better than anyone else ever had.

"What's your plan?" Ray asked.

"Finish the books. Upload them to every file-sharing site on the internet. Make sure the world gets to read them before George changes his mind or the publishers shut it down."

"And then?"

"Then I guess you arrest us."

Ray sighed. "How long do you need?"

"Forty-eight hours. Maybe less."

Ray looked back toward the garage, then at his phone. His partner had left three voicemails. His captain probably wanted an update. Somewhere in Santa Fe, other detectives were following up on leads that Ray had been slow to pursue.

"I'll see what I can do," Ray said.

Chapter 11

What Ray could do, as it turned out, was not much. By the next morning, his captain was asking pointed questions about the pace of the investigation, his partner was threatening to go over his head, and someone from the FBI had called asking about jurisdictional cooperation.

"We need results, Castellanos," Captain Martinez said. "This isn't some missing person case. George R.R. Martin is a celebrity. The media's starting to pay attention."

Ray nodded and made appropriate sounds about following leads and coordinating with other agencies. Then he went back to his desk and deleted two witness statements that contained accurate descriptions of Tommy, Diane, and Marcus.

Meanwhile, in the garage in Española, things had gotten complicated. George had started giving editorial feedback on Linda's writing, and Linda had started arguing back. Tommy, Diane, and Marcus found themselves in the middle of creative disputes between two professional writers who had very different ideas about how the story should unfold.

"You can't kill off Tyrion in chapter three," Linda said for the fourth time that morning.

"It's a bold narrative choice," George replied. "Subverts expectations."

"It's stupid. Readers will throw the book across the room."

"Good books should provoke strong reactions."

Tommy raised his hand like a student in class. "Um, maybe we could vote on it?"

Both writers turned to stare at him.

"Vote?" George said.

"We're the fans," Diane said. "We're the ones who've been waiting for this story. Maybe we should have a say."

Marcus nodded enthusiastically. "Like a writers' room. Democratic decisions."

Linda rubbed her temples. She'd never worked with co-authors before, especially not co-authors who'd been kidnapped by their collaborators.

"Fine," she said. "All in favor of keeping Tyrion alive?"

Three hands shot up immediately. George's remained folded across his chest.

"Motion carries," Tommy said happily.

George muttered something under his breath that sounded like "focus groups" and "artistic integrity," but he made a note in his manuscript anyway.

By late afternoon, they'd voted on seventeen plot points, argued about character motivations for three different POV chapters, and collectively decided that Daenerys needed to be less whiny in her internal monologue. Linda had to admit it was the most engaged she'd ever felt with a writing project.

It was also the most illegal.

Chapter 12

The call came at 3:47 PM on the second day. Ray was in the middle of explaining to Agent Morrison from the FBI why his team hadn't made more progress when his phone buzzed with a text from Linda: "We're uploading in 20 minutes."

Ray's heart jumped. "Agent Morrison, can you excuse me for a moment? I need to check on something with my partner."

Ray stepped outside the precinct and called Linda. "You're done?"

"With the first book. We're calling it *The Winds of Winter: A Completion by Fans, For Fans*. George hates the title, but we outvoted him."

Despite everything, Ray smiled. "Where are you uploading it?"

"Everywhere. Reddit, Twitter, Archive of Our Own, BitTorrent, Dropbox. Marcus knows about computers. He's making sure it can't be taken down."

"Linda, once you do this, there's no going back. I'll have to arrest you."

"I know."

"All of you. George too, probably."

"He's fine with it. He says he's been needing an excuse to fire his publicist anyway."

Ray looked back toward the precinct building. Agent Morrison was probably wondering where he'd gone. His captain was definitely going to want answers. His career was most likely over.

"Upload it," Ray said.

Twenty-three minutes later, Ray's phone exploded with notifications. Text messages, missed calls, social media alerts. *The Winds of Winter* was trending on Twitter. Reddit had crashed twice. Someone had already started recording an audiobook version.

Ray drove to Española with Agent Morrison, his partner, and six other law enforcement officers. They surrounded the garage and announced themselves properly. Ray knocked on the door and waited for Tommy to open it.

"Hi," Tommy said nervously.

"You're under arrest," Ray said, and he meant it this time.

Epilogue

The trial lasted three weeks and became the most entertaining legal proceeding in New Mexico history. George R.R. Martin testified that he'd never felt physically threatened and that his "captors" had actually helped him overcome a serious case of writer's block. The prosecution argued that kidnapping was kidnapping, regardless of the victim's eventual satisfaction with the outcome.

The defense called expert witnesses on the psychological effects of unfinished artistic works and the history of collaborative storytelling. Someone from Harvard wrote a paper about "post-modern literary hostage negotiations." The judge allowed cameras in the courtroom, partly because he was curious about how it would all turn out.

Tommy, Diane, and Marcus were convicted of unlawful detention and sentenced to two years of probation and 500 hours of community service, which they served by teaching creative writing classes at local libraries. They became minor celebrities in fantasy fiction circles and received offers to ghostwrite fan fiction for various other unfinished series.

Linda was convicted of accessory after the fact and sentenced to one year of probation. Publishers Weekly wrote a feature article about "The Romance Novelist Who Saved Fantasy Literature." Her agent fielded seventeen book deal offers in the first week after the trial.

Ray Castellanos was fired from the Albuquerque Police Department for obstruction of justice and tampering with evidence. He was hired two weeks later by a private investigation firm that specialized in finding missing persons in the entertainment industry. His first case involved tracking down a horror

novelist who'd been missing for six months. Ray found him living in a cabin in Montana, suffering from writer's block. Ray suggested he might benefit from some "focused motivation."

George R.R. Martin was never charged with any crime. The FBI decided that pressing charges against a kidnapping victim for cooperating with his kidnappers would set a bad precedent. George returned to his home in Santa Fe and discovered that the stress of the whole ordeal had actually cured his writer's block completely.

Freed from the pressure of finishing *A Song of Ice and Fire* (the fan-completed version had been downloaded 50 million times in the first month), George started work on a new fantasy trilogy called *The Shattered Crown*. Without the weight of reader expectations and unfinished plotlines, he wrote with the same energy and passion he'd had twenty years earlier.

He finished the entire trilogy in eighteen months. HBO bought the television rights for more money than they'd paid for *Game of Thrones*. The first book debuted at number one on every bestseller list in North America.

In interviews, George said the experience had taught him that sometimes you need to let go of one story to tell another. He never publicly thanked Tommy, Diane, and Marcus, but he did send them signed copies of all three books in the new trilogy, along with a note that read: "Thanks for the motivation. Next time, just send an email."

The fan-completed version of *The Winds of Winter* remained available online, despite various legal attempts to remove it. Most readers agreed it wasn't as good as George's original work, but it was satisfying enough to provide closure for millions of fans who'd been waiting more than a decade for the story to continue.

As for the second book, *A Dream of Spring*, Linda's completion was universally panned by critics and beloved by fans. It featured more romance subplots than any previous book in the series, three different wedding scenes, and an ending where most of the main characters survived and found true love. George called it "an abomination." Fans called it "exactly what we needed."

Ray still kept a printed copy of the first completed chapter on his desk at his new job. Sometimes, when he was having a bad day, he'd read the opening paragraph and remember the week when three desperate fans and one romance novelist had accomplished the impossible.

It wasn't the ending anyone had planned for, but it was an ending. And sometimes, Ray thought, that was enough.